Fine Art students at UAL
'We are layered by the different places we live in, aren't we?'

Mid-study report of a 4-year longitudinal study
for the University of the Arts London

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Duna Sabri
Centre for Public Policy Research
Department of Education and Professional Studies
King's College, London
UK

Acknowledgements

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Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

Summary

This report is part of a four-year longitudinal research study which explores the higher education experiences of undergraduate students at UAL from different ethnic backgrounds; and the interplay between these experiences and their intersected identities. The study aims to illuminate statistical patterns in students' attainment, specifically, that black and minority ethnic students are around 20% less likely than white students to gain first or upper second degrees (UCPU 2016). This research study is based on the premise that creative arts students' multi-faceted identities are intrinsic to their practice, and so seeks to understand the interplay between students' identities and experience at UAL in the expectation that such an understanding will bring about changes in taken-for-granted practices that underlie the gap in attainment.

Prevalent perceptions about the attainment gap are explored and set against what is currently known about patterns of attainment from national research and analysis within UAL. For example, it is often argued that differences in attainment between ethnic groups can be explained by: socio-economic status or prior qualifications and language. The evidence is that none of these factors account for the difference. There are also debates and initiatives which relate to characteristics of the institution: staff diversity and curriculum. These factors are currently seen as fruitful avenues of inquiry and development.

This report focuses on a sub-sample of 14 Fine Art students who joined the study in 2014-15 at the start of their year 2, the original study having started in 2012-13 with 53 year 1 students from Fashion, Graphic Design and text-based courses. The Fine Art students were interviewed during September and October of 2014 about their experiences of years 1 and aspirations for year 2. They were interviewed a second time between July and September 2015 about their experiences of year 2. The analysis of these interviews takes place against the background of pre-existing analysis of years 1 and 2 from the wider study. Unsurprisingly there is much overlap but also some distinctive aspects of the Fine Art context.

The following themes emerged as significant to the interplay between identity and experience:

> There is uneven participation from different ethnic groups in the creative arts and this pattern provides the context for an analysis of familial support and its implications for material and other resources that students are able to draw upon during their time at UAL. When students' familial context holds an ambivalence towards the students' choice of studying fine art, then the potential for moral and material support is reduced. Conversely, when there is consonance between familial contexts and the students' practice, then there is greater potential for moral and material support and even participation in the students' work.

> In their accounts of their art practice, students varied in the extent to which they assumed a sense of legitimacy and entitlement for bringing in identity work. White home students tended to take it for granted that identity-related intents could and should be the subject of discussion. This process was fraught with greater challenges for some minority ethnic students who feared being set up as cultural 'experts' and sometimes struggled to elicit the engagement of others in their work.

> Students related to the course and curriculum in different ways: for some the course was a means of redirecting their lives, while for others it was one means of providing the material resources with which to support their existing artistic endeavours. Some

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

minority ethnic students – both home and international – wanted a greater representation in the curriculum of non-European art and post-colonial perspectives that reflected their interests. Cultural relevance was an issue that permeated their experiences of relationships with tutors as well. Consistently good support from tutors tended to be experienced more often by white home students than by minority ethnic home and international students.

Students vary in how they seek and interpret feedback, and in how they relate it to their own view of their work. All students wished to have more time with tutors talking about their work and more feedback. They varied in the extent of their confidence in their own evaluations and in the extent to which formal feedback and assessment criteria mattered. Minority ethnic students were more likely to feel that they were insufficiently questioned and their work lightly critiqued out of politeness on the part of their fellow students and tutors. However, there was also evidence that some students successfully developed relationships over time that supported deeper exchanges.

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

Introduction

THE GAP IN ATTAINMENT: FRAMING THE PROBLEM

There is widespread concern across the higher education (HE) sector about unequal attainment between white and black and minority ethnic (BME) students. In addition to a range of initiatives in many universities, several national agencies have commissioned research in this area: National Union of Students (2011), the (then) Department for Education and Skills (Connor et al 2004, Broecke and Nicholls: 2007), and the Higher Education Academy (Singh: 2011) and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Race and Higher Education (Runnymede Trust: 2015). Most recently HEFCE commissioned a review of the causes of inequality in students' outcomes in HE (Mountford-Zimdars, Sabri et al: 2015) with a view to informing policy interventions at institutional and national levels.

Statistical analysis at UAL shows similar patterns to the sector as a whole, and in some areas the gap is more pronounced. Although there are fluctuations within courses from year to year, the overall figures for UAL remain persistently high. In 2013/14 20% more of white students were awarded a first or upper-second class degree than were black and minority ethnic students. This is a decrease from the level in 2010/11 of 24%. The foregoing figures are for home students only. The pattern of difference between home and international students is increasing: in 2013-14, 21% more of home students gaining a first or upper-second degree than international students; in 2010-11 this figure was 18%.

A growing number of researchers are drawing attention to curricula as an under-researched aspect of HE's relationship with social equality, and it seems to be potentially a site of exclusion in HE (Quinn 2006). As Clegg (2011: 99) argues, curriculum development in recent years has been dominated by the idea of 'relevance' and the employability agenda. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of applied and industry-related courses within institutions that attract students from lower socio-economic classes. This shift in the nature of curricula in some parts of HE exacerbates the considerable inequalities between student experiences at different institutions and in different courses. The implication that Clegg draws from her argument is that highly context-dependent curricula can limit students' scope for intellectual development and close down the possibilities for students to fulfil their future potential. Dewey is concerned with precisely this point when he warns of the possibility that experience may well result in the narrowing of conditions for subsequent learning (1938/1997: 37). Researching the curriculum seems to offer fruitful ways of understanding students' experiences (Sabri 2011) and the inequalities that underlie differential attainment patterns. The potential for curricula to exacerbate social equality is already a focus for research at school level (e.g. Sullivan, Zimdars et al., 2010) and is beginning to be addressed within HE (Shay 2013; Mclean et al 2012).

Within UAL institutional research analysing student departure and persistence (Sabri 2010a) and students' responses to the National Students Survey (Sabri 2010b) pointed to the need to explore particular sites of students' experience: curriculum, peer interaction and opportunities to make use of links with industry. Previous reports from the *Experience and Identity* project have traced the processes of conceiving and making work for students of fashion, graphic design and text-based courses(Sabri 2014); and how the condition of being absorbed in one's work can be sustained or undermined by factors in the students' environment (Sabri 2015).

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

EXPLAINING THE GAP IN ATTAINMENT: CURRENT THINKING

At the inception of this project consultative discussions were held with deans, programme directors, and course leaders. As the project has progressed tutors have been interviewed, as part of the fieldwork. This report does not include a systematic analysis of those interviews. This section briefly explores some of the observations and initial thoughts that have been expressed in these discussions about the gap in attainment between white and black and minority Ethnic (BME) students. These prevalent perceptions are then set against what is currently known about patterns of attainment in UAL. I draw on the statistical report by Anna Mountford-Zimdars (December 2013) and annual reports provided by the University Central Planning Unit (UCPU), the work of the UAL Diversity team, and Shades of Noir and the work of Aisha Richards and Terry Finnigan.

Socio-economic status

It is often believed that socio-economic status (SES) explains the attainment gap between White and BME students. At national level Broeke and Nicholls (2007: 18) establish that the probability of obtaining a First or Upper Second degree increases, the lower a student's index of multiple deprivation (IMD), based on postcodes. They point out that IMD is not the same as SES but there is overlap between them. They used IMD because it had greater explanatory power and there was less data for SES (2007: 14). After controlling for IMD and many other factors such as prior attainment and disability they conclude that there still an unexplained difference between White and BME students. Within UAL, the following graph illustrates the correlation between attainment and the intersected effects of ethnicity, SES and gender.

1st and 2.1 Attainment by Gender/SEC and Ethnicity 13/14
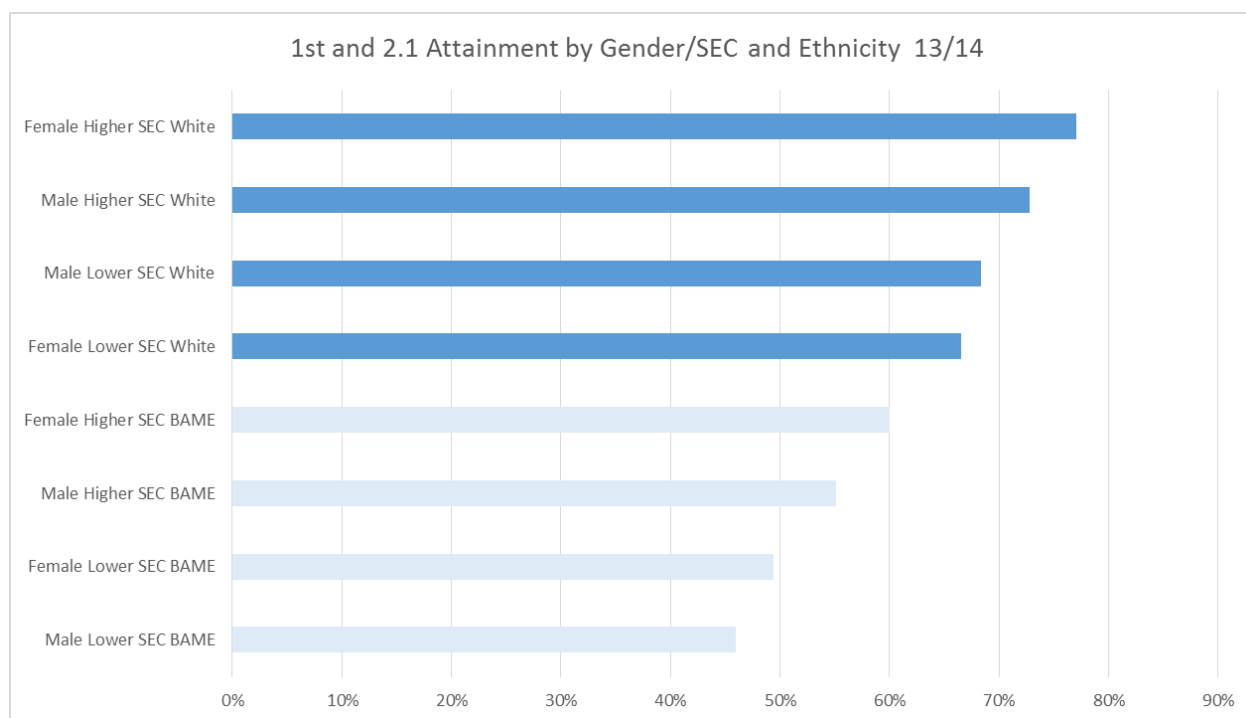
The graph above suggests that the effect of ethnicity seems to have a more powerful structuring effect on attainment than SES.

Prior attainment

Many tutors observed that what frequently distinguished students who were awarded relatively high marks from those awarded relatively low marks is their prior educational attainment and the nature of students' prior education. In particular, whether a student had

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

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come with a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design as opposed to entered directly from A-level or equivalent qualifications seemed to be significant.

At a national level Broecke and Nichols (2007) and Richardson (2008) have established that the effects of prior qualifications are only partly responsible for explaining the gap in attainment. UAL UCPU's analysis on highest entry qualifications shows that 72.22% of Fine Art students with FAD obtain first or upper second degrees while 73.5% of those with L3 or above qualifications do so (UCPU statistics for 2013/14 cohort). There is similarly little difference between the two groups in other subject areas. The variation in achievement by prior attainment seems slight in comparison to the explanatory power that is often accorded to it in discussions of the attainment gap between white and black and minority ethnic students.

Language
Particularly when discussing the persistence of the pattern of inequality not only among home students but also among international students, tutors often speculated on the possibility that language proficiency played a part. Most national research in this area pertains to home UK students only and language is not investigated. Within UAL an analysis was recently undertaken (Mountford-Zimdars 2013: table 2, reproduced below) that compared fee status within each ethnic group. The limitation of this analysis, of course, is that fee status is not a perfect proxy for language proficiency. Nevertheless, the results, from data over five years (2007-12) are thought-provoking. While for some ethnic groups the gap in attainment between home and international students is some 10%, for Chinese students the difference is barely 5%, and within some subject groupings Chinese international students outperform Chinese home students. The gap for home and international mixed ethnicity students is similarly small. It is not possible to make a similar comparison for black students because the numbers of international black students is too small. However, it is notable that the probability of attaining a first or upper second degree for home black students is below that for all international groups. These observations suggest that language is a poor predictor of attainment.

Status and ethnicity	All subjects
Home White	72.8
EU White	70.8
EU Refused	70
EU Mixed	68.3
International White	62.6
Home Mixed	57
Home Refused	56.8
International Refused	55.9
International Mixed	52.8
Home Other	52.5
Home, Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani	51.8
Home Chinese	48.9
International Other	48.4
International Chinese	43.1
International, Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani	40
Home Black*	39.6

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

Staff diversity

A few course leaders were uneasy about the extent to which their course teams reflected the diversity among their students. Many were attentive to the need for gender diversity and had taken steps to ensure a balanced gender representation within course teams, among ALs and guest speakers. Less prevalent, but nevertheless present, was an interest in the ethnic diversity of course and programme teams. The benefits to diversity were seen in terms of ensuring there were 'role models', with whom students could identify; and second in terms of a global knowledge of art and design contexts and practices (more on this in the paragraphs below).

At UAL these concerns with staff diversity are being directly addressed in '*en›route',* a programme of initiatives, led by Tili Andoh, Head of Diversity, that aims to attract, develop and support professionals from under-represented black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds to navigate careers in arts higher education. It comprises three strands: developing an inclusive culture that builds momentum behind the aims of en›route; recruitment and career progression; and staff development.

Curriculum

'Some students never really sign up to the intellectual project that is the course': in this pithy observation one tutor encapsulated two fundamental truths. The first is that all course curricula constitute a particular view of what it means to be a practitioner: graphic designer; artist; fashion designer; journalist; curator. They all impart some notion of 'an implied student' (Ulriksen 2007). The second truth is that not all students comply with this intellectual and creative project: of these some accurately comprehend it, explicitly or tacitly, and choose not to participate in it, others do not make sense of it at all.

Some tutors seemed to be taken aback at the suggestion that their curricula were historically and culturally situated; and may be somewhat Euro-centric. Others were highly conscious of the extent to which their views of 'art' were contestable and very much constructed by their own class, race, ethnicity and situated experiences or their own practice. Several talked about how often the examples they used with students were not only UK-specific but London-specific. There were also accounts of discussion and debate within course teams that seem to have taken place for some years.

The work undertaken by Aisha Richards and Terry Finnigan as joint lead tutors on the module: Inclusive Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, offered through the Learning Exchange's Academic Practice Provision, reveals a range of contexts in which tutors across UAL have engaged with issues of race and ethnicity within their curricula (e.g. discussing 'Whiteness' among photography students) and started to change the delivery and the resources available within their course. In addition, these discussions link to UAL's support and inclusion of Shades of Noir http://www.shadesofnoir.org.uk/, a programme of events and resources that promotes change through raising the profile and level of debate on equality in art and design higher education.

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

Research design and methodology

This research deploys qualitative methods of interviewing and observation to illuminate historically persistent statistical patterns of inequality in attainment. Alongside longitudinal qualitative fieldwork, statistical analysis of the UAL population of undergraduate students over five years is being explored in the light of emerging insights from the qualitative data. The aim, ultimately, is to establish a relationship between the qualitative and quantitative data sets.

At the start of the fieldwork discussions were held with Deans and Programme Directors of each of the participating courses. The researcher took along statistics which showed the attainment of students by ethnicity over three years within the sampled courses, comparisons with same discipline courses in other colleges, and with UAL as a whole. These discussions explored staff's interpretations, experiences and observations. Tutors from each course were also interviewed primarily to brief the researcher about the curricular environment and pedagogic purposes within the case study courses. There was also an attempt to explore with tutors what issues might underlie the gap in attainment, drawing upon their day-to-day experiences and observations.

Students were interviewed twice: the first interview addressed how they came to be on their course, their motivations, expectations, and initial impressions of life as students. The second interview reflected upon certain points from the first. In addition, the students brought a piece of work upon which they had received tutor feedback. We discussed how the work was conceived and made, its reception by tutors and others, and their reflections upon that reception.

SAMPLING

Two Fine Art courses from two UAL colleges were selected. This pattern of sampling at least two courses from different colleges is in keeping with the wider UAL project.

Approximately 70% of incoming students from these course groups were cluster-sampled and invited to take part in the study. Respondents were sent a further summary of the project and invited for their first interview. Most first interviews took place in September/October 2014, and the remainder during the Autumn term. During this interview there was further discussion of the project to ensure consent was well-informed. Second interviews took place in June, July and September 2015. The letter of invitation, participant information sheet, and questions for first and second interviews are available on request.

A total of 14 students have participated in the Fine Art study: 7 female and 7 male; ages ranged from 19 to 48; 7 home students, 3 EU and 4 international students; 6 were white, 3 were Chinese, 1 was Korean, 2 were mixed race, 1 of another Asian origin and 1 of another non-white ethnicity. The mix of status and ethnicities was spread across both colleges. Five of the students were first generation entrants to higher education and 10 had a FAD qualification, with the remainder having BTEC or equivalent. At the end of year 1 their marks ranged from C+ to A-.

ANALYSIS

The central organising concept that is used in analysing the findings is that of identity. Rather than conceiving of it as an essential personal set of qualities or characteristics, identity is defined in this project as socially and historically constructed in an interplay between what students bring and the environments within which they operate. In Hall's terms, the subject is

both 'hailed' and invests in a position through 'articulation' (Hall 1997: 6). Furthermore, within this project identity is analysed in relation to a particular domain of social life: becoming and being an art student at UAL, though students' pasts and futures are implicated in their present experiences. Again, drawing on Hall, 'because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites…' (Hall 1997: 4).

The analysis strategy is informed by an awareness that research in this field has been dominated by: (i) quantitative analyses which show recurring patterns over more than a decade; and (ii) qualitative analyses based on interviews with students and/or staff, typically on a one-off basis. The ambition of this longitudinal study is to develop an iterative relationship between a range of qualitative and quantitative data sets which include: observation notes, artefacts, interview transcripts, participant validation, and national and institutional statistics. The aim is to describe the causal mechanisms through which students come to be assessed as having attained better or worse degree results (Clarke et al 2014).

The qualitative analysis is undertaken with an awareness that the researcher does not have direct access to the experiences of research participants:

> When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet, they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was" aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences…neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand then only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. (The Personal Narratives Group 1989: 261, quoted in Riessman 2002)

The aim, therefore, is to describe a set of worldviews through systematic qualitative analysis contextualised by statistical data. Students' interview transcripts were coded with the aid of qualitative analysis software, Nvivo, using a combination of low inference codes such as 'familial context', and higher inference codes such as, 'fine art positioning'. Within this thematic organisation of interview data, the researcher sought qualitative explanations of the statistical patterns relating to attainment. For example, having observed that some students were consistently able to identify with their tutors, and others were not, the data were interrogated in terms of the interplay between ethnicity and this pattern of experience.

In this report quotes are attributed to an interview number followed by demographic information. Students' anonymity is regarded as paramount to ensuring that there is no possible effect on their relationships with staff. Where identification is deemed possible, incidental details have been altered or demographic information omitted.

Findings

FAMILIAL CONTEXTS AND MATERIAL RESOURCES

Understanding the familial support enjoyed by different students entails putting it in a social and historical context. In particular it is worth noting that of all the students who participate in higher education just over 10% enter the creative arts (HESA 2014-15). When we break this down by ethnic group we find that there is wide variation: as the table below (Woodfield, 2014:28) shows black British students of Caribbean origin, white students and students of other ethnicities are over-represented in art and design while black British students of African origin and British Asian students (of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins) are under-represented.

Students' ethnic group	% in sector	% in art and design	Number
Black or Black British - Caribbean	1	2	1498
Black or Black British - African	4	2	1590
Other Black British	0	0	241
Asian or Asian British- Indian	3	2	1487
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2	1	683
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	1	0	245
Chinese	1	1	972
Other Asian	1	1	883
White	71	76	71785
Other ethnicity	3	4	4064
Ethnicity not known	13	12	11452

White includes: White; Irish, Traveller.
Other ethnicity (including mixed) includes: Mixed – White and Black Caribbean; Mixed – White and Black African; Mixed – White and Asian; Other mixed background; Other ethnic background.
Ethnicity not known includes: Information refused. This category includes 11% of overseas students from whom ethnicity data is not collected.

This pattern is largely consistent when compared with HEFCE's analysis for 2003-4 entrants (HEFCE 2010/13), suggesting that there are longstanding and persistent habitual choices among different ethnic groups. Such uneven participation from different ethnic groups elicits two questions: how are the creative arts historically and socially situated in different ethnic groups? And conversely, how do the creative arts situate different ethnic groups? The first of these questions is explored in this section and the second is addressed below in the sections on 'conceiving and making work' and 'relationships to the course and curriculum'. In the sample within this study we can see a pattern of differential familial support among the students. The qualitative data in this instance both explain and nuance the statistical pattern.

Opting for a Fine Art degree is a very particular choice: unlike the humanities and social science subjects which might be deemed to 'keep one's options open', Fine Art is not undertaken for generic credentialising purposes; and, on the other hand, unlike other highly specific vocational options such as medicine, law or engineering, it is not undertaken as a financial investment with a sure promise of well-paid employment.   Moreover, in contrast to some other subjects in the creative arts, it requires a commitment to art for its own sake, and a pre-existing desire to make work. Yet, its pursuit within a higher education context is not a given, hence many prospective fine students are dissuaded from choosing it by the argument that they can 'do art' alongside other (more lucrative, less risky) career choices. This is the

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

discursive context within which students and their families operate when they are choosing a Fine Art degree.

It is not surprising therefore, that many students choose Fine Art in a familial context where support for their choice is limited or ambivalent. There are of course others whose familial context is highly supportive, particularly if parents or other relations are themselves artists, designers or have aspired to be artists in the past. Fine Art, as a choice, provokes a wide variation of response from those close to the students who opt for it. The force of familial context in the lives of Fine Art students is therefore particularly significant. If we also add to this context the history of participation in the creative arts by different ethnic groups, then it is possible to speculate that some students – notably 'other' minority ethnicities including those from mixed backgrounds, white and black African students - are more likely than Asian students to come from familial contexts where higher education in the creative arts is valued, supported and experienced alongside the student.

While the following student's parents were eventually reconciled to his choice, at first:
> they felt like it would be difficult to get a stable job and it would be difficult to have, … 'a good life', I think that's what they said, translated with some sort of loss in meaning, but I think …they were supportive in the end. [S123 2a male Chinese home student]

The following two quotes illustrate the range of participation from family members that some students can experience. This first one refers to active participation that suggests permeability and consonance between familial context and art practice:
> In this [work] that's my [sibling] … we just messed about … she really loved it…[S112 2a female mixed ethnicity home student]

The next alludes to an ongoing dialogue where the student is comfortable both in having her work critiqued and in receiving her parent's critique as contestable:
> Yes, I talk to my Mum quite a lot about the different things I'm doing, and sometimes… she has quite a particular taste… So it's always interesting to see when she's like, 'Oh yes, I really like that', or when she's a bit like, 'What? I don't really understand.' But yes. [S114 2a female white home student]

For the following students, the interaction between their familial contexts and art practice is characterised by a degree of friction, sometimes tensions. This first quote refers to the challenge of creating a basis for conversation about one's art practice in a familial context:
> Oh it's been quite difficult for my father to understand actually. Because he keeps asking me, 'so what kind of art do you do?' And I tell him installation and he's like, 'so what is that?' [S124 2b Asian international student]

In this second quote the student seems ill-at-ease with what she perceives as indiscriminate support from her parent:
> I don't like [my parents] to see my work…I don't like my Mum seeing my work, because it's kind of blind praise, and I don't need blind praise. I know it's a very nice thing, but I find it way too much, you know. [S118 2a female Asian other international student]

Later in the year, this same student, recounts a continued sense of unease and feeling of being misunderstood:
> I don't like to tell my family about my artwork … They're not afraid to ask questions that I'm too impatient to answer basically.
> Researcher: Do they have an appreciation of the kind of art that you're interested in?
> Yes. Sometimes they seem… They don't know what it is, at the same time. They just don't understand art. But I'd like to help them understand most of the time but …it's an effort and I

get really grumpy and I feel pressure from my family for something that I should be proud of myself, and feel pressure from myself. [S118 2b female Asian other international student]

Familial context has implications for the degree of financial support that is available to students. This isn't simply a matter of a family's financial resources (though that in itself is important) but also of the ways in which those resources can be deployed. For example, a student who has unequivocal support from his or her family will find it easier to ask for financial help than a student who feels they have yet to justify their choice to pursue fine art. Furthermore financial resource is not simply money given to the student but also the possibility of support in kind, for example, a mother being able to travel to support her daughter through a bout of depression.

The following quote is from a student who is weighing up whether to take up paid employment over the Summer:

Here's the thing, I've got two options, and this is very bad for me and I wish there were no two options, I wish there was only one option so then I would be desperate, desperate enough to concentrate on it. But I've worked in the past and I know what it's like and I did it throughout foundation, and I had nowhere near the amount of energy that I would have now to put into work, to put into thinking about work as well. Because I worked 20 hours on foundation because there was no student loan back then and that's quite tiring. But this year, because I still have my overdraft, I've not touched a single penny of it, so there is a possibility of me just using that because it's only two months rent that I can't pay. So it would more than cover that. So I could actually not work over the summer and just think about art but I don't know so, that's just the easy option. So, I think deep down, I do really, really want to find a job and I've applied... [S123 2b male Chinese home student]

The impact of having to acquire paid work compared with being able to afford not to has been explored in a previous report Sabri (2015) in general terms. The only qualification to those general observations is that perhaps the capacity to undertake unpaid internships is less crucial for fine artists. Within this sample of 14, a few students spoke about the limitations imposed by their capacity to meet the cost of materials. Some took care to invest in materials that could be re-used.   Students who are financially constrained will be at a greater disadvantage if they are in a familial context that is not wholly supportive of their choice. Furthermore, some international students felt constrained by the scale within which it is feasible to work because of the lack of storage space for their work. One student, about to embark on his final year, talked about already having to dispose of his work because it wasn't possible to take it back home and there was no-where to store it at college.

CONCEIVING AND MAKING WORK

For their second interviews, students were asked to bring a piece of work (or images of work) to show and discuss with the researcher. The purpose of this discussion was to extend the usual parameters of the interview method as 'story-telling' and give the students a means of particularising their experience of conceiving and making work, and responding to its reception among peers and tutors. In analysing their accounts of conceiving and making work, attention was given to the ways in which identity work was woven through them, and carried different meanings for students. Differences were noted between home students who shared (or at least were very literate within) the cultural references of the white British majority of students, and some minority ethnic home students and international students who brought to bear upon their work a set of cultural references that were rarely shared by tutors or fellow students. This is not to say that there are sharp distinctions or exclusive boundaries between the different sets of cultural references held by individuals: of course there are many commonalities of interest but there are nevertheless variable degrees of challenge in the task

of communication faced by students from different cultural backgrounds, some of whom engaged in a wide range of identity work.

One of these challenges is that of navigating a relationship between identity work and practice. It was noticeable that some students – more than others – assumed that their identity narratives had a legitimate place in their work as artists and were fully confident that others would value this interplay and wish to understand it. This was expressed in their capacity to talk at length about the work that they showed and relate it to particular aspects of their personal history and developing interests. They referred to other instances in which they had explained their work to others who had shared it or in some way, through their own history, participated in their intended meaning. They also often talked about work that 'has been shown', where the passive voice seemed to indicate an intrinsic value in the work. This taken-for-granted legitimacy was a feature predominantly of white students' accounts but not exclusively so.

Minority ethnic students were more likely to problematise identity issues:

> … I think it is obviously important for us to hold and understand where we come from in our past, but also to recognise that we are becoming much more integrated and there's this massive flow of information and communication between people from everywhere. So our identities are not so hooked to where we come from, they are adapted in other ways of thinking, just through who you meet or the music you're interested in or anything like that. [S126 2a female other ethnicity home]

Several of the students in taking part in this project often grappled with dilemmas about their roles in relation to their society and culture of origin. On the one hand they had engaged in some deep thinking about their own identity work and wanted to express some complex ideas or feelings about their place in the world. On the other hand they were very wary of setting themselves up as 'ambassadors' or 'experts': roles that they felt coerced into because of the difficulty of communicating in a social context where no-one shared their historical and cultural references.

There were also students who made work that related to their identity but agonised about sharing it with others:

> Sometimes I'd really believe in what I'm doing and other times …I just have very low self-esteem in what I was doing and I felt like I didn't know as much about art, I hadn't experimented as much as other people, so it was those kinds of feelings. And when I was making, … so I spent two weeks making this piece for the show at the end, so sometimes I'd feel like, 'oh my God, this is going to be great, people need to see this, I think it would really resonate with people', or have a good, positive effect. And then other times I'd have, I guess, a very conflict[ed] mind. Maybe that's just normal or… I don't know, so… I've very much avoided crits
> Researcher: Did you just not turn up?
> Yes, not turn up or just… I still get extremely nervous, ridiculously nervous for talking about my work and if I'm feeling good that day, it'll probably go all right. If I'm not, I will just talk about it like I don't even care… I now do [turn up]. I now force myself to go to all of my tutorials. [S126 2a female other ethnicity home student]

Some students seemed to reflect carefully on how much their work revealed about themselves:

> I'm quite a private person, hence ..I'm not into very personal…revelatory, I'm not a Tracey Emin. I think it's still important to, [though] there's still a lot in that creative process that is about me and my interpretations and stuff like that. [S117 2a male white home student]

This reflection was part of a broader deliberative plan in this students' practice to explore widely but retain a sense of coherence between different pieces of work and he was also, even at a relatively early stage, keen to situate his work in relation to that of others. What is absent from this students' account, as compared with that of some others, is a sense of being limited by his own perception of the extent to which those around him understand his work. In contrast, a female Asian student [S118 2a] whose work had been overtly political had decided at the end of the first year to take her work in a more personal direction, and then at the end of the second year had switched again to emphasise the political – combining personal and political - in an effort to 'disseminate properly [so that] every type of person would understand.

The point at which identity issues surfaced in students' work varied. For example, one student described the mechanics and personal photographic content of a piece of work but could not articulate a particular intent:

> Why? I don't know why. I never really know why. It will take me a while to work out why. It's just capturing images, isn't it, really? I'm not that theory-based as a lot of people want me to be. I quite like the process. [S113 2a male white home student]

So rather than setting out with an intent, this student seemed to 'work out' his intent or meaning through the process of production and through sharing his work with others. Similarly:

> I have a large-scale story which I've been working on which is about two [locations] and their relationships, and I didn't know until last year that it was actually about me being in different cultures; that's what it was about. It was very obvious that... after I found that out, it became obvious, but...
> *Researcher: How did that realisation come about?*
> When I was actually speaking about my stories, I would get responses from my peers, saying, 'Is that about you being in London?', and I thought, 'I guess so, maybe', but it's not only London, it's from all the other places I've been. Not all of them are my experience. Some of them are seeing other people's experience or reading articles or books… [121 2a female Asian international student]

Moreover, the process of production itself often entailed working on an aspect of being an artist. For some students working in the studio and developing a rapport with their peers, including help in processing the reactions of others was important.

Two students talked about coming to a realisation that grades did not matter to them as much as they first thought. Both were home students of different ethnicities, the first talked about this realisation at the start of the year 2 and the other at the end of year 2:

> I feel a bit older. I feel a bit more confident. I feel a bit more drunk all the time. Not actually drunk, but... Why is that? It's hard for me to just say. It's just I've realised that sometimes things don't really matter, not in the way that I don't care about them, but in the way that is it really that important how someone perceives you? Is it really that important ... what grades you get? [S123 2b male Chinese home student]

For both students this realisation was part of a broader re-thinking of priorities and a greater confidence in their own judgements.

RELATIONSHIPS TO THE COURSE AND CURRICULUM

The relationship between each student's practice and the course varied somewhat. Some students seemed to arrive already thinking of themselves as artists, while others looked to the course as a process for 'becoming an artist'. One student saw her life up to coming to the college as a large ship that had to be turned around through her engagement with art practice

in the course.   A few students came with a perception that their practice was driven from within and that the course was an enabler in a much more passive way. For example, at the end of year 2, the following student felt that:

> [Being on this course] Buys me time. Because practicing, I would not be able to afford rent, I would have no means... I would not be able to have a studio space, there are the social benefits. So, yes, my peers. [S123 2b male home Chinese student]

Most often however, the course is a kind of catalyst to develop practice that has started but is felt to be in its nascent stages. In these instances students are looking to widen their networks and use facilities but they are not necessarily reliant on the course, the course is just one element of how they are developing their practice:

> I could potentially work by myself but I also need to have a comparison or work in certain environments. I think all the workshops you can use…Resources and the environment itself and the fact that you meet other people. I'm not sure about the lectures and the seminars because whenever I go to the seminars, I go there but I'm not sure how much I'm getting from it. I'm also not as critically strong as other people with maybe a more, a deeper, understanding of that, which I would like to have actually and it's not that I don't have it at all. [S116 2a male white EU]

> I think there has been a sort of positive evolution to my practice, yes, very much so, and I'm pleased with that.
> Researcher: Where do you locate the causes of that development?
> I think the biggest one is just doing more myself. I think the actual act of doing means that you understand what you're doing and you evolve what you're doing, so it probably explains why it has evolved rather than having that sort of dramatic change. [S117 2b male white home student]

With a few exceptions students from various backgrounds wanted a greater degree of structure during year 1 but what constituted structure varied considerably. For some white students there was an interest in coming to know 'what was required' and in seeing some coherence and planning in series of lecturers or in the course as whole. The focus of developing their relationship to the course for these students was to reconcile the structure of assessment criteria with their own aspirations:

For some international students, particularly early in their experience there was a sense of bewilderment at what later seemed self-evident. So for example:

> When I saw [off-site show] in the timetable at first, I was quite apprehensive about it because I did not know what that meant. What was an off-site exhibition? What are they expecting of us? And when they told us what it was I was quite surprised. And it felt quite daunting at first. Because to have to take responsibility for all the decisions that we make … it took a lot of consideration and planning. [S124 2a Asian international student]

Home and international minority ethnic students sometimes expressed a sense that the course lacked cultural relevance for them: one student complained that her tutor in the first year had only ever referred to white male artists and she had had to wait until the second year for a female tutor who, as a matter of course, mentioned more female artists. In a contrasting experience, one Asian student described how a book about post colonialism recommended to him by his critical studies tutor had influenced his research and that this had become 'a game-changer' in his thinking about his work:

> I guess it's finding myself in the world, how I am in [my country of origin] and how I maybe relate to people or don't relate to people, and how it connects with fear. So, [my work] somehow needs to find that way of understanding what I want and what I want to pick up and don't pick up from reading text, and understanding the world, I guess.

> Researcher: From a perspective that you can relate to?
> Yes. Or being at two different spaces; space or the inbetween.
> [S125 2a male Asian international student]

The reference this student makes to 'being in two different spaces' or 'the inbetween' echoes the accounts of mixed race college students from a variety of disciplines (Garrod et al 2014) who occupy a stance that is dissimilar from both cultures with which they are familiar, and find themselves navigating a social terrain that forces them to confront differences in racial and cultural identity.

While the student quoted above benefited from a particular interaction with a tutor to help him make those explorations, other students felt that there was not enough in the curriculum that that they could identify with:

> I'm going to say that's very minimal, extremely minimal. Maybe two lectures have been on black art. Most of the work doesn't seem to be about outside cultures. They might be about gender, things that relate to an extent, but not… actually, we had one black female artist, I think, come in… [In lectures] we don't learn about art from the East or art from Africa or art from South America. So, I think that is difficult for some of us, definitely. [S126 2a female home, other ethnicity student]

There were several other comments from students about the diversity of tutors within the course teams. None explicitly argued for greater diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender or class but there was a wish expressed for a greater diversity of visiting artists and speakers. It was felt my some that there were not enough 'young' artists, and for others that the occasional black artist was an exception. This was not just a desire for symbolic inclusion but a wish for a greater sense of relevance to the students' own work.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH TUTORS

The extent to which students felt that their work would be understood – that others would be interested in understanding it – varied enormously. Some students have highly positive experiences when they first arrive:

> I just thought my first year tutor was wonderful.. absolutely right tutor for me, because, I was coming in and I didn't know what to expect… She was just great, very warm, encouraging… There are different ways of getting people to do things, but she chose the right one with me, in that she was encouraging. All of her feedback and everything – absolutely. …a wide knowledge of other artists who I might be interested in, and was prepared to let me talk and discuss where I thought I might be going. Some of this might be standard advice, but to consider your audience… [S111 2a white male home student]

There are several elements to this experience: the student feels that the tutor cared about his progress, took an interest in his work and was prepared to listen – perhaps at length. What he could see was 'standard' advice was discussed so that he could see its particular relevance to this work. In his next interview this student seemed confident about his relationships with tutors, even one that he had not yet met who was to supervise his dissertation.

Similarly,

> Well [this tutor] has been really great. Always got interesting things for me to look at. Bits of text. And does seem to understand what I'm looking at, even if I've made massive jumps in my work between seeing [tutorials]. Last year [another tutor] was really good. [S114 2b white female home student]

Another student, asked what he thought enabled his tutor to understand his work explained that his experience of one tutor was in fact typical of his experience of tutors more generally:

> I think it's the calibre of the tutors, actually. One thing I was very impressed with, there was an initial group tutorial and I couldn't actually attend it. I was really impressed that she came and found me in the studio and said, 'we should sit down for half an hour just to get to know each other and so I can understand what you're doing'. So it was a different tutor that I had for the second year, and fantastic, above and beyond what I expected. It was very good. [S117 2a male white home student]

Speaking at the start of year 2, another student had a very different experience:

> They don't, apart from [one tutor], … I feel like they look at the art for the art's sake and not your connection to it, …not why you're doing it. Or maybe it's just because I'm very bad at expressing where it comes from and I hold back from doing that, so I wait for someone to pick my brains, which they might just not be interested in doing. It's like, 'what do you want to talk to me about? That's what I'll give you back.' … They don't really try…they don't get very deep into the work, I feel. But, again, that just might be my…
> Researcher: Why do you think you're reluctant to be more upfront in explaining what you think is important for them to know?
> Because I'm scared. I don't know. I'm trying to get out of that. I just don't feel comfortable in myself, in what I'm doing … so I'm just scared to put it out there, because I'm unsure of it and it's like I don't even… but it's silly. If I find that interesting now and important now, I should just express what that is, more so. [S126 2a female, other ethnicity home student]

The same student talking about the tutor she perceived as exceptional in her experience described how this tutor was:

> …very personable, very gentle and seems to… like with [other tutors] I didn't even feel I could really talk about what my work is, because I had a tutorial [and] at the end the only point [that was] made was, 'so why is this projection different to the size of this?' Nothing about what I was actually doing, why I was doing it. Nothing apart from the technicalities and [this exceptional tutor]… either she knows a lot or can just very much come on to your level and try and have a dialogue about what you're actually thinking about. But then is also interested in what I'm doing and gives me good references and people to look at it, which obviously helps.

As the quotation above suggests there were a number of students for whom being understood – and feeling that there was genuine interest in their work – was an exceptional rather than normal occurrence. Another student who started out appreciating that throughout her Foundation year and first year there had been at least one tutor who seemed 'globalised' never felt that there were any tutors that she could identify with and by the end of the second year was feeling quite disillusioned, having noticed that tutors told students to look at 'the exact same things', calling into question the extent to which they knew enough about students' distinctive interests and work [S118 2b female Asian international student]. So after a promising start, this student started to come into college less frequently and grew less confident about using college spaces and interacting with tutors and peers.

Another student recounted in her first interview how she initially found it hard to establish a rapport with her tutor:

> I think that's simply because [the tutors] are reading a new person, and especially art, most of the time it comes from what is inside and to figure out the essence of the person after one session, that is very unlikely. I would say if you have patience and just try to converse with each other a bit more, then they will understand you, which was... I think that was why at first I was a bit struggling, because I wasn't able to talk to my tutor personally that much. …Because to talk to your tutor, you have to make an appointment, and for me, if I want to make an appointment, I need to have a really narrowed down, significant topic to talk about, and in most cases I couldn't really figure that out and I didn't want to waste anyone's time. That's why I didn't reach [the tutor] a lot. [S121 2a female Asian international student]

Two hurdles face this student: first, what she experiences as brief and infrequent interaction with her tutor prevents the kind of dialogue that might result in being (or feeling) understood. And arguably, the fewer 'layers' of identity that are shared between tutor and student, the more time it might take for that understanding to germinate. The second hurdle for this student is her belief that she must have a 'significant narrowed down topic' to take to an appointment.

This contrasts sharply with the perspective of many home students who would have a much greater sense of entitlement about seeing their tutor. Later in the year this student felt that she had been cast as 'the expert' in relation to her culture of origin:

> when I asked if I could read articles written in [my language] and perhaps translate them, [my tutor] fully encouraged and trusted me on that job. I hope [my tutor] can be a bit more critical when I actually bring up these articles, because I'm not a translator, and when I'm translating I probably will put in my intentions, my feelings about the issue. [S121 female Asian international student]

This experience was common with another international student who felt that criticality was rarely applied to her work – which also related to her ethnicity - by tutors and fellow students alike. It was as though there was not sufficient trust to enable those conversations to take place. She wished that someone would say something 'even if it is offensive' just so that a conversation could take place.

FEEDBACK AND RECEPTION

Students were asked about conversations they had had about their work with tutors, peers and others. Their responses were analysed to explore how they sought or avoided feedback on their work, how they interpreted the responses of others, and the ways in which these responses mattered to them.

A few students were conscious of formal assessment criteria:

> There's two sides to this I think: the hoops that one must jump through… because you must fulfil specific things on specific deadlines. And then there's all of this thing which you're doing on your own, so it's like you're trying to steer your ship in a certain way, but you have to go past certain buoys to get there. That's really how I see it. [S111 male white home student]

However, in the main, formal processes did not feature very much in students' thinking about feedback. Most often they came into play when students were questioning the rationale for the grade or assessment that they had received on the basis of the effort that they had put in. What seemed to matter the most was that their work received sufficient attention and that it was understood by others – peers as well as tutors.

At one extreme there were students who were euphoric after having been applauded or had their work recognised through an external award or a contact who wanted to buy their work. Experiences such as this were associated with students' confidence in the credibility of their own judgements:

> I took into account what I had been graded on or the notes on reports and stuff, but I just didn't really care that much because if I was really happy with it and I'd made what I wanted, then it didn't really matter. And it's such a liberation because I've always been the person who is like, 'I need to get A star'. And then I'd rather just listen to what was said in crits and just carry on… So all those conversation in crits and tutorials and the studio things, that just seemed to be way more valuable than 'oh, you got an A for this'. [S112 2a female mixed ethnicity home student]

At the cognitive level it seemed common for students to regard feedback as subjective and contestable.

> Art is all based on opinion; even your tutors have an opinion. Even if the rest of the class likes it, your tutor can dislike it. But that's how the art world is. It's even that with degree shows, it's why more than one person marks... if one person marks all the artwork they're going to be more biased towards one piece than the other. So, yes, people will disagree, but that's... it's helpful even when they do disagree … so you might as well get used to it. Especially if you want to be a practicing artist… [S113 2a male white home student]

And similarly, the following experience was of feedback on an essay:

> it was funny, the feedback I got back was … basically, 'I disagree with your whole position', and didn't really address the arguments that I'd made. They did make some other very good points about my work, the essay I'd done, but I was a bit confused by that because I've put forward a position, or maybe a possible theory about this particular person's work, and you've said 'I disagree' I feel like if you're going to say that you have to justify a bit. [S114 2b female white home student]

There were also students who delighted in causing a reaction to their work, wanted to bring about discussion that 'otherwise would not happen' or cause unusual visceral reactions. The category of 'feedback' for them was a small and somewhat inconsequential part of what they sought. Nevertheless, even among this group, there was a need to be heard and to have an appropriate forum to explain and perhaps acquire technical advice, sometimes at an early stage in their thinking:

> …the problem today was that the tutorial, it seems stupid, but it was not in a room it was in the studio and other people were around and I didn't feel comfortable to talk about it, so it wasn't as good as I wanted it to be. But yes I got some useful feedback, I don't know, I didn't really want people to hear what I was saying. I could have asked, just ask [to be] with them in the room but I didn't.
> Researcher: Why did you feel that you wanted a private space? Because they were early ideas, preliminary…?
> Well basically I'm really didn't want information to leak before a performance. So I don't really want people to know anything about it so that's one thing. And the other thing is that I feel comfortable myself if I'm just me and the tutor and that's my personality. Maybe just some people don't really care so. [S116 2a white male EU student]

More commonly, it is not so much space to talk as time to talk that students wished to increase. They often felt that the time allocation – whether in group settings or one-to-one – did not do justice to the work that they had produced. Minority ethnic students – both home and international – more often made observations about the quality of dialogue about their work:

> I need proper, constructive criticism, which I'm not really getting. I'm just getting 'you can check-up other things'. It's always, that is so true... I'm sorry, I just had a realization that it's... whenever there's a critique, it's always like; do I really need attention to this [other] work? Because I don't really …connect with this.
> Researcher: Is that on the part of tutors, or students or both?
> Everybody. I think it's politeness, because people are trying to find some sort of [meaning] and I don't really know. And I don't know if they know exactly what I made, or what the topic is about; but usually it's out of politeness, because they don't know. [S118 2a female Asian international student]

By the end of year 2 this student was still feeling a little frustrated with what she heard as bland feedback and a monotonous set of B grades. Then on one occasion she was given a C grade for a written piece of work and was delighted because at last she had specific and critical feedback which really engaged with what she was trying to do.

Another student went through a similar trajectory in gaining more meaningful dialogue in relation to her work. At first, she found that she was being given references that related to the form that her work took and she felt her tutor was not engaging with the substance of what she was doing, as she understood it. This persistent mis-interpretation led this student to consider leaving the course and part of the reason she decided to stay was to prove the worth of what she was doing. By the end of year 2 she was able to report that although she had felt constrained to begin with, the dialogue with tutors had developed in productive ways:

> … I was put into this [nationality] artist box, and I had to talk about only my culture with such confidence. But through these conversations, actually, my tutors have been kind of telling me, affirming that it's okay if I talked about more European fashions and American fashions. In relation to [my] culture. So I think that has helped me a lot. [S121 2b female, Asian international student]

This student also observed that:

> Actually, generally, the grades have been bumped up, so I'm quite happy about it. I think for my last essay and theory, I got an A. Which was quite surprising. And for my practice, it was a C before, and now it's a B.

Preliminary Conclusions

That students should able to bring their identities – in Hall's terms, the 'articulation' of their identities which are also 'hailed' by those around them – into their work hardly seems contestable in fine art education. Yet it seems to be harder to do for some students than others. It is not possible to say that it is harder in specific ways for all black and minority ethnic students as compared to their white counterparts; or for all international students as compared to home students: after all a good proportion of the former categories in each comparison do attain very well. But it is possible to say in the current configuration of curricula and day-to-day teaching and learning that it is more often harder for BME students (home and international) than it is for white students.

Conceiving and making work are social, cultural and historically-situated activities for both students and tutors. Similarly, the design and structure of course and curriculum, conventions in relationships with tutors, and practices relating to the reception of work and feedback are highly contextualised by the specific social, cultural and historical milieu of each fine art course. It follows then that the relative social and cultural positions of students in these contexts will impinge on their potential to do their best work.

Just as students need to develop a literacy around what it means to be a student and practitioner in a particular discipline, so too do tutors need to develop a capacity to recognise the particular misunderstandings or states of 'not knowing that they need to know' that students often come with. This endeavour varies greatly among different students, and therefore for tutors in relation to the diversity of students they meet.

'We are layered by the different places we live in, aren't we?' is a quote from one of the interviews in this study. It points to layers of commonality and difference between tutors and all students: some layers are deepened through experience, others are still forming, fragile and brittle. In many ways the findings here barely indicate the complexity of this layering process which pre-dates students' arrival and recursively acts upon the identities of students (and tutors) at the fine art courses of Chelsea, Camberwell, Wimbledon and Central Saint Martins.

This report is intended to raise awareness of a range of student perspectives, of unintended consequences of teaching and assessment practices, and of the effects of certain ways of organising and resourcing learning and teaching. It is intended to aid reflection on the ways in which tutors relate to students who share, or do not share, their own cultural references. It is hoped that those tutors who are already curious about the experiences and perspectives of their students will find avenues of enquiry within the findings that they might pursue with their own students. For example, they might reflect on the characteristics of 'the layers' that constitute how students communicate and see themselves, and the extent to which their curriculum and frames of reference reflect the identities of the course team members, and the extent of its cultural relevance to students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The findings are also aimed at course leaders and tutors who may be reviewing briefs, the teaching that supports them and the structure of feedback mechanisms. Much evidence (in education research literature) suggests that students' progress is significantly influenced in the course of formative assessment (however informally this occurs). Within this study, the evidence is that conversations about work are heavily structured by the quality of working relationships and rapport among tutors and students.

Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk

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Duna Sabri
d.sabri@arts.ac.uk